

Tailoring support for different children

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Children who require attention will be supported within the pre-school or externally, such as by existing government-funded programmes, depending on their needs.

Dr Choo says: “Not every child identified with a developmental concern will need intervention with a therapist or be in an early intervention programme.”

For instance, a baby not lifting his or her chin when placed on the tummy may be spending most of the day lying down and does not have regular tummy time, she says.

The baby may benefit from developmental supportive positioning, which a parent or caregiver can help with, she adds.

Another example is a child who is new to school and does not speak the English language so he or she may not understand instructions, she says. As a result, he or she may be seen as non-compliant or inattentive.

“The child’s teacher may consider simplifying the instructions, using visuals to augment verbal instructions and checking with the child for his or her understanding,” she adds.

Children who are still struggling may need extra targeted support from early childhood educators, with additional input from educators who specialise in learning support or therapists.

Dr Honey Ng, deputy director of PCF’s inclusive education team, says the goal of MIP2 is to support children in the pre-school setting as much as possible.

She adds: “It is an opportunity for teachers to unpack and develop perspectives in working with children with developmental needs, as well as expand their skill sets to guide the children and support them to reach their full potential.”

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The PAP Community Foundation Sparkletots centre at Fernvale Block 455 has features such as (clockwise from far left) a gym room, flexible seating options and a sensory room with a bubble tube. PHOTOS: PCF

Sensory spaces, fun gyms for kids with special needs in pre-schools

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Several pre-schools are adding spaces and equipment to support children aged three to six with special needs in a pilot inclusive programme led by the Early Childhood Development Agency.

Full-time early intervention professionals and visiting allied health professionals are also deployed to the pre-schools to provide specialist support to children with developmental needs, as part of the Inclusive Support Programme launched last October.

This cuts parents’ travelling time between pre-schools and early intervention centres as their children can receive the services in school.

The first of the pre-schools to be ready – PAP Community Foundation (PCF) Sparkletots centre at Fernvale Block 455 – has seven special needs children in its programme so far, all newly enrolled from October last year.

The Fernvale centre has a play corner for children to calm down before resuming class activities, a gym room and a sensory space with lights and music.

Enrolment of special needs children began at three more centres this month. These are run by the Education Ministry, Busy Bees Singapore and another one by PCF. Two more centres by NTUC First Campus (NFC) will be ready next month.

The pilot follows recommendations by a workgroup set up by the Ministry of Social and Family Development in 2019 to make pre-

school education more inclusive.

The seven children at Fernvale PCF centre, spanning the Nursery 2 to Kindergarten 2 levels, have conditions such as global developmental delay and autism. The pre-school has 42 children in those levels.

Ms Marini Khamis, senior director of PCF’s pre-school management division, says it adopted “universal design for learning” principles – a teaching approach that offers flexibility in the way children learn. It has, for instance, added materials and equipment that can meet different learning needs of children, including picture boards depicting the daily schedules and the steps needed to complete tasks.

“This helps provide a sense of structure for children who may require it, and help them easily transition from one activity to the next seamlessly. These picture boards also help to reduce uncertainties and encourage independence in children,” she says.

Seating options such as balance balls, foam stools and wedges are also provided to help children focus during activities as well as improve their core strength and posture, she adds.

Ms Antonio Rogina Ocho, a PCF teacher who works with its inclusive education team, says the Fernvale centre has a “messy room” to allow children to “self-regulate, re-balance, be creative and have their sensory needs met”.

Features include calming music, a bubble tube with changing lights, fibre optic lights and a sensory light projector that improves orientation through

visual stimulation.

Children can also unwind at a calming corner with soft toys and sensory play objects when they feel overstimulated.

The pre-school also set up a gym room equipped with slides, buoy swings and therapy balls, among other things, to support gross motor skills and physical development.

Meanwhile, renovations at the two NFC pre-schools will be completed by next month. Up to 15 per cent of each centre’s capacity will be for children with special needs.

Ms Deniece Bidhiya, NFC’s acting head of inclusion, says its approach was to be “as natural as possible with slight modifications”.

A change is the installation of noise-absorbing panels on ceilings.

“The aim is to lower the noise levels to help children regulate themselves and help teachers with classroom management. Noise can trigger certain behaviour in children with high sensory needs, so we want to minimise this,” she says.

The centres will have sensory play items and seating such as wobbly chairs, as well as visual schedules and picture cards.

Ultimately, inclusive education goes beyond facilities, Ms Deniece says, and it is about different partners coming together to understand the children’s needs.

Teachers are learning to work with early intervention professionals on planning and carrying out lessons together, crafting individualised plans for the kids’ learning, and ensuring children can play and learn together.

Ms Antonio says tasks will be tailored according to needs. “For example, if a child is unable to write letters as he or she is in the pre-writing stage, he or she can use play dough to form the letters.”

At PCF, children with special needs are paired with their typically developing peers in a buddy system.

Ms Tricia Tam, head of inclusive education at Busy Bees Asia, whose Small Wonder centre is in the pilot programme, says: “We will deliver the same curriculum using differentiated methods so that children with developmental needs will be able to learn at their own pace.”

A partially padded occupational therapy room will be set up and fitted with equipment such as a loft with a slide, multiple types of swings, a climbing net and tyres.

The centre also has ample space for equipment such as wheelchairs, says Ms Tam.

“It has open corridors as well as flat floor spaces with minimal obstacles, and we will be putting in ramps and tactile paving to allow for smooth transitions between different areas of the centre,” she adds.

Ms Deniece hopes the extra support will ease parents’ anxieties.

“The teachers will also benefit from this as their fears of accepting these children will be allayed because there is support.

“If you know how to support these children with the correct tools and environment, and understand their needs, they are actually no different from the typical children.”